



## *Patriarchy, and Colonialism in Ama Ata Aidoo's Anowa : A Feminist Approach*

**Dr. Ammar Shamil Kadhim Al-Khafaji**<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>College of Arts, University of Baghdad, Bab Al-Muadum Campus, Baghdad, Iraq.

[dr.ammarsamil@gmail.com](mailto:dr.ammarsamil@gmail.com)

**Abstract.** The research investigates in detail the fascinating story of its title character, which may work as an allegory for Africa itself in its past. Ama Ata Aidoo is miscellaneous writers who wrote in different literary genre like drama, short stories novel and, poetry and criticism. She is also an active feminist. Aidoo is against the colonial practice and its influence on African minds. Aidoo's play Anowa confronts painful issues in Africa's past, mostly those of the slave trade. She goes further to tackle issues of patriarchal domination and African feminism, like the relationships between individuals and society, women and motherhood, men and women, husbands and wives, mothers and daughters, and above all the future invasion of ancient traditions. Anowa is an exciting play full of deep questions.

**Keywords:** Slave Trade, African feminism, patriarchy, and Cultural invading

**المُلخَص.** يبحث البحث بالتفصيل في القصة الرائعة للبطلة التي يحمل عنوان المسرحية اسمها، والتي قد تصلح لان تكون قصة رمزية لأفريقيا نفسها في ماضيها. الكاتبة ايما اتا ايدوو هي إحدى الكتابات الأفارقة الأكثر غزارة في انتاجها الأدبي فهي كاتبة مسرحية وكاتبة قصص قصيرة وروائية وشاعرة وكاتبة مقالات وناقدة. يقابل إنجازاتها نشاط سياسي حازم جعلها في طليعة تطور الحركة النسائية الأفريقية المعاصرة. لقد كانت أيدوو تخشى على الدوام من استمرار الممارسات الاستعمارية وتأثيرها على العقول الأفريقية. ركزت



على البؤس الفردي وآلام الرجال بشكل عام والنساء بشكل خاص، بسبب التأثير النفسي للتجارب الاستعمارية وما بعد الاستعمار. تواجه مسرحية "أيدوو"، "أنوا"، قضايا مؤلمة في ماضي إفريقيا، خاصة تلك المتعلقة بتجارة الرقيق. تذهب إلى أبعد من ذلك لمعالجة قضايا هيمنة الابوين، مثل العلاقات بين الأفراد والمجتمع، والمرأة والأمومة، والرجال والنساء، والأزواج والزوجات، والأمهات والبنات، وقبل كل شيء الغزو المستقبلي للتقاليد القديمة. الأمر الذي جعل من المسرحية مليئة بالاثارة والاسئلة المعقدة وقد اعتبرها النقاد تحفة نسوية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: تجارة الرقيق، النسوية الأفريقية، الأبوية، والغزو الثقافي.

## 1. Ama Ata Aidoo's Biography and Literary Career

In her essay "Aidoo, Ama Ata" in the book entitled "Encyclopedia of the African Diaspora: Origin, Experience, and Culture," Miriam Gyimah claims that the playwright of the title is internationally acclaimed as a novelist, poet, playwright, short story writer, and critic, and that she is Ghana's foremost woman writer. As she was born in 1942 on what was then the Gold Coast under British colonization, she is a writer whose works highlight the issues and problems facing women in Africa and their relation to the West (71). After fourteen years of living abroad, Aidoo living abroad for more than made her mind to return to Ghana. She has explored during her literary career the dreams, challenges, and hopes of African women in a period of Africa's recent history that extends from the time of the continent's encounter with Europe, the slave trade via colonialism, and post-colonialism towards the globalizing world (Gilbert, 2013: 98). In her play, Anowa, Aidoo challenges heartbreaking issues in Africa's past, chiefly those of the slave trade, patriarchal supremacy, and African feminism (Gyimah, 2008: 72).

## 2. Aidoo as a Feminist:

Several African female writers are currently conveying ideas about the conflict and challenge between Africa and the West, male-dominated societies, and the need for cultural and social changes. The process of protest in African feminist literature against patriarchy was discussed a long time ago. The reason is that women always face submission and patriarchy. They do not get the same rights that men have (Dion, 2020: 48). Ama Ata Aidoo stands out as a remarkable Ghanaian writer who, alongside a pioneering group of exceptional women authors, is dedicated to reshaping the perceptions of women's roles through their literary endeavors. Their aim is to bring these perspectives to the



attention of their male counterparts. In this group, Ama Ata Aidoo is undoubtedly a notable figure, and her impact is profound. Notably, Aidoo emphasizes that her understanding of feminism doesn't solely stem from experiences outside Africa; instead, it is rooted in her Akan society as well. (Zulfiqar, 2016: 45) Needham suggests that writers have highlighted how African women, who have long been oppressed, are beginning to voice their hidden emotions. These writers argue that these women are breaking free from the norms that have historically subordinated them to men, a change triggered by their experiences as victims of patriarchal systems. In an interview, Aidoo further expands on this idea, asserting that the deterioration of Africa's political, social, and economic systems is directly tied to the significant oversight of women's roles and contributions in discussions about development. (123).

As Davis puts it, Aidoo has shown her frustration and dissatisfaction with the era of post-independence Ghana and other African countries. She criticizes the continent's neo-colonization by its own people as well as the absence of esteem for African women's literary works (73). Unlike Western feminist writers who often critique disparities in politics and the workplace, Aidoo takes a distinct approach. Her emphasis lies in highlighting the shared sense of disappointment felt by rural mothers and wives. She delves into the hardships that come with family life and sheds light on the harrowing experiences of domestic abuse (Snodgrass, 2006: 12).

According to Gilbert, Aidoo's ideas are deeply embedded in both her critical analyses and her creative works. Gilbert suggests that Aidoo's perspective indicates that African women possess a feminist framework within their own cultural context. This framework, Gilbert argues, negates the necessity for African women to adhere to Western feminist approaches in seeking solutions to their struggles, especially considering that women in the West have sometimes benefited from colonialist control. Aidoo's portrayal of the African mother, which is particularly poignant in Anowa's monologue where she recounts a childhood nightmare, serves as a cultural commentary that underscores the play's critique of patriarchal systems. Within this dream sequence, Anowa becomes a symbol representative of Africa itself. This evocative imagery offers an avenue to interpret Anowa's infertility as a consequence of the historical slave trade, which has deprived her of her reproductive capacity (98).

### 3. The plot of Anowa: According to Parekh and Jagne





The plot of Anowa can be summarized in the story of Anwoa, who refuses to marry any of her suitors until she meets and falls in love with Kofi Ako. Most of the plot of Anowa tackles the subject of the power of traditions, conventions, and customs and the results of not following such creeds in society. Anowa's parents, especially her mother, do not agree with Kofi Ako as a husband for her because they think he is not able to be a good husband. In an act of rebellion, Anowa dismisses the advice and defies her parents' wishes. She makes a daring decision to elope with Kofi Ako, pledging never to return home again. They embark on a journey of independence, establishing their own trade connections with white foreigners. They succeed in gathering a lot of wealth and slaves; their relationship, however, begins to deteriorate. The greatest ordeal of their marriage was that Anowa was not capable of bearing a child. Anowa has to stay without work because she no longer needs to do slave work. She also resents the idea of possessing slaves, as she believes it is ethically wrong. As Kofi Ako gets richer, Anowa becomes more desperate. Kofi Ako has sacrificed his manhood for the sake of his wealth, and, eventually, Anowa learns that he is impotent. The play ends with Kofi in shame, shooting himself while Anowa drowns herself (67).

#### 4. Folklore and Traditional Narrative Techniques

According to Gilbert, the play is introduced with a prologue or prelude delivered by a couple of narrators or a kind of chorus who present the main characters and offer us hints about the main subjects in the play. The narrators are an Old Woman and an Old Man, who are jointly described as "The Mouth That Eats Salt and Pepper" Two women referred to as 1st and 2nd women, also play a similar role, supporting insight into the matters and themes of the play (98). The playwright based her play on folktales and regional legends about "disobedient and rebellious daughters." She uses oral literary techniques to tell the story, whose incidents take place in a traditional Ghanaian setting. Through her skill as a storyteller, Anowa harnesses the old legend of a woman defying her parents' wishes by marrying a man. This legend, shared with Aidoo by her grandmother, takes on a tragic twist with what Hildegard Hoeller calls a "pseudo-Freudian ending." Aidoo's work opens up the possibility for others to utilize Ghana's rich dramatic and narrative traditions to address contemporary issues. Aidoo herself acknowledges that her storytelling is deeply rooted in Ghanaian traditions, drawing inspiration from the way stories are woven within her community. She emphasizes her upbringing in a storytelling environment,





with her mother actively engaging in the art of "talking" stories and singing songs, as mentioned in Gilbert's work (97).

The unique voices of an elderly man and woman play a significant role in the story. They make appearances at the start and end of each phase, offering insights into the events and reflecting the differing perspectives within Fanti society. The elderly man, often speaking in poetic form, shows compassion both for the well-intentioned yet misguided treaty signing and for Anowa's challenging situation. In contrast, the elderly woman, representing the common people, uses everyday language and is quick to criticize Anowa for breaking with tradition. The intertwining of their voices into a single character skillfully bridges divides, capturing the complexity of viewpoints and harmonizing opposing ideas (Sanka, 2013: 6).

Opoku-Agyemang indicates that the first direct description of Anowa happens in the random dialogue of the Old Man and Old Woman before she even shows up on stage. Yet the old couple's views are not identical. There are times when they have opposing opinions. The Old Man's ideas appear closer to those of Anowa than to the views of others in the play. The different opinions are vital to shed light on the contradictions and tensions of the play (21). The characters of the Old Woman and the Old Man play a crucial role in the play's dynamics by acting as conduits that introduce the audience to the intricacies of Abura society. Through their perspectives, the audience gains insight into the historical backdrop as well as the immediate dramatic development. They show us the variable views of society. The old Woman and the Old Man, like the Greek chorus, clarify and offer judgment on the incidents of the play. Two women, referred to as 1st and 2nd women," act in a similar role. They provide insight into the subjects and themes of the play. Aidoo also makes wide use of other oral narrative forms such as songs and proverbs (22).

### 5. The Rebellious Anowa who Defies Conventions:

Anowa's defiance against the confines of traditional arranged marriages was exemplified by her choice to be with a man with whom she could collaboratively build a successful life. The Old Man characterizes her as a person of rich complexity, referring to her as a "child of several incarnations." He highlights her unique ability to embrace her own stories, find humor in her own jokes, and heed her own counsel. (Aidoo 102). Anowa defies the customs of her people. She does not marry at a young age, as is normal, and when she finally marries, she does not follow the cultural belief that a woman should not work outside her home. Anowa defies conventional concepts about women.





She, as a daughter and when becomes a wife, breaks deeply rooted traditions, and she pays for defying both the norms that rule the way of life in a typical African place. Although she is not educated, she cannot accept the fact that she must be regulated by her own traditions and conventions. In the beginning, she selects her own husband without her parents' agreement. She insists on never returning, no matter what occurs. She addresses her mother, saying, "Mother, I shall walk so well that I will not find my feet back here again" (107).

Anowa stands out from societal norms by choosing her own husband and maintaining a marriage filled with respect and love until her life's end. She breaks conventions by actively assisting her husband in his business ventures and doesn't object when he takes another wife to bear a child. In a culture where women traditionally stay home, Anowa's rejection of this norm is apparent. Appiah highlights her distinctive perspective on marriage and society, which sets her apart from her female counterparts and invites both criticism and opposition from the community. Nonetheless, Anowa shows great courage in following an unconventional path, defying societal expectations by selecting her life partner independently (6). In their union, having children carries immense importance, and Anowa and Kofi's inability to conceive significantly impacts their happiness. Anowa's aversion to being labeled as barren and her yearning for children of her own is palpable. She takes it upon herself to determine whether the issue lies with her or her husband when it comes to infertility. Ako's tragic decision to end his own life upon Anowa's revelation of his potential impotence underscores his awareness of the moral wrong in trading his manhood for wealth. This action is deemed reprehensible within the context of Akan society's conventions. In Africa, where having children holds immense significance, being unable to do so is considered a considerable setback.

## 6. Slave Trade:

Anowa stands out from societal norms by choosing her own husband and maintaining a marriage filled with respect and love until her life's end. She breaks conventions by actively assisting her husband in his business ventures and doesn't object when he takes another wife to bear a child. In a culture where women traditionally stay home, Anowa's rejection of this norm is apparent. Appiah highlights her distinctive perspective on marriage and society, which sets her apart from her female counterparts and invites both criticism and opposition from the community. Nonetheless, Anowa shows great courage in following an unconventional path, defying societal expectations by selecting





her life partner independently (6). In their union, having children carries immense importance, and Anowa and Kofi's inability to conceive significantly impacts their happiness. Anowa's aversion to being labeled as barren and her yearning for children of her own is palpable. She takes it upon herself to determine whether the issue lies with her or her husband when it comes to infertility. Ako's tragic decision to end his own life upon Anowa's revelation of his potential impotence underscores his awareness of the moral wrong in trading his manhood for wealth. This action is deemed reprehensible within the context of Akan society's conventions. In Africa, where having children holds immense significance, being unable to do so is considered a considerable setback. User 1.6. Slave Trade : Anowa, Aidoo's Anowa is set during the colonial era. The play addresses Africa's role in the slave trade. Aidoo attempts to break the silence that Ghanaians and Africans in general have imposed on the matter of the slave trade. In so doing, according to Smith and Cede, Aidoo as a writer is against (neo) colonialism, she illustrates how Africans, enticed by capitalistic greed and European ideals turn to subordinate their own people (50) Gilbert argues that Anowa is set on the Gold Coast about thirty years after the Bond Treaty, an agreement granting the British trading priority over the Fanti area of what is now Ghana. The bond of 1844 not only bound Fanti slave-traders to the white imperialists but also positioned them at a historical juncture where the narratives of colonialism and capitalism intersected (98) Fanti who hoped to secure protection against the Ashanti, another Akan people, and signaled the permanent arrival of a British presence at the Gold Coast. Submitting their own territories to colonial rule, they lost their self-determination and to their active involvement in the slave trade (99). The play proposes that Anowa's ultimate breakdown is partially because of her not working, the thing that made her life lose its meaning (Gilbert 198). Anowa and Kofi become very rich because her husband changes their trade to that of human cargo, but she disagrees with any of the prophets about what she considers the most demoralizing of occupations—the slave trade. According to Gay Wilentz, Anowa is condemned for her stance rather than praised for it by her community; the greed of the people overshadows the good moral judgments fixed in the culture, and as in recent times, the conventions are suited to fit the greed. Anowa, feels that she has lost her right to children through her involvement in this inhuman occupation. In a fierce discussion with Kofi, Anowa comments, "No man made a slave of his friends and came to much himself. It is wrong. It is Evil (Aidoo, 2001: 112) Finally, Anowa comprehends that it is her husband, Kofi Ako, who has exhausted his





"masculinity acquiring slaves and wealth" (125) and addresses Kofi saying, "Why did you want me to know? You could have told me Because we were friends like a brother and sister " (125). The marriage falls apart. Anowa's rebellion goes on in the practice of revolting against the vices of Kofi and men in general and shaming Kofi by going about in rags even though the family business continues to prosper. Her chance for revenge comes when she discovers that Kofi has become impotent. She spread the news to the whole household, and, incapable of bearing the disgrace and scorn, Kofi kills himself (Opoku, 1997: 73). According to Dunton and Gibbs the alienation between Anow's values and ethics and those of her husband or another word "the image of false Masculinity with which the play closes (wealth and slave –ownership identified with impotence) insure its provocative impact especially for a male audience (26) the play Anowa exemplifies the fight between convention and modernism, the rebellion against parental power

### 7. The Dilemma Technique:

Dilemma tales embody a time-honored tradition in Akan society, serving as a platform for discussing relevant social issues without supplying explicit solutions. These tales present thought-provoking questions, leaving the audience to engage in the process of seeking their own resolutions. In the play "Anowa," the narrative culminates tragically with both Kofi Ako and Anowa taking their own lives, a sense of impending doom set by the presence of the African funeral march in the final phase. This march casts a shadow of inevitable tragedy over the ending. In the concluding remarks by The-Mouth-That-Eats-Salt-And-Pepper, an elderly woman, the blame for the unfolding tragedy is directly pinned on Anowa. On the contrary, the perspective of the elderly man differs; he doesn't singularly assign blame to the individual but rather spreads the responsibility across the wider society. This contrast in viewpoints mirrors a recurring theme in dilemma tales, where intricate issues are explored from various angles, inviting interpretation and discourse rather than yielding definitive answers. This approach mirrors the traditional Akan approach of fostering introspection and dialogue concerning significant societal matters.

### Conclusion

The connection between literature and culture is profound, much like the intricate threads that weave through life itself. Ama Ata Aidoo, a perceptive dramatist, intimately understands the tapestry of the traditional Akan society







in Ghana and the deeply ingrained values it holds. These values, such as the unwavering support for extended families, the reverence bestowed upon the elderly, the cherished role of children within marriages, and the timeless customs of matrimony, remain as essential pillars in contemporary African societies. They not only promote unity and social harmony but also preserve the rich cultural identity of these communities. Nevertheless, there's an inherent tension as certain aspects of these cultural norms encounter resistance amidst the waves of modernity. Aidoo's female characters embody this struggle, bravely navigating a landscape of shifting boundaries—geographical, social, cultural, and emotional. These women courageously challenge the bounds set by patriarchal traditions, defying conventional narratives of marriage and motherhood. At the same time, they bear the weight of vulnerability and suppression within the confines of societal norms. Anowa, a central figure in this exploration, encapsulates the inner conflict experienced by many Africans grappling with the influences of Western ideals while striving to preserve their African heritage. Aidoo's works are also a powerful critique of the post-independence era in Ghana and across Africa, shedding light on the concerning trend of neo-colonization perpetuated by those who should be protectors of their own cultures. Aidoo emerges as a strong advocate against the mistreatment of women, lending her voice to those who often remain unheard. Her words resonate as a resounding echo for the marginalized, grounded in a deeply empathetic social perspective aimed at delivering a meaningful message. From a post-colonial perspective, Anowa stands as a poignant symbol of the elegance that characterized pre-colonial African society—a beauty that was marred by the incursion of colonial forces. In parallel, the narrative charts the transformative journey of a woman navigating the confines of a patriarchal society, evolving from a carefree young girl to a dedicated wife. However, her trajectory turns tragic, marked by mistreatment and suffering, with her final actions serving as a poignant reminder of the irreversible nature of certain choices. Aidoo's work masterfully delves into the complexities of these dynamics, painting a vivid portrait of the intricate dance between tradition and modernity, identity and colonialism, and the strength and vulnerability of women in a changing world.

### References

- [1] Aidoo, A. E. (2001). Anowa. In G. Helen (Ed.), Postcolonial plays: An anthology. Taylor and Francis Group.
- [2] Appiah, P., et al. (2021). The Illiterate African Woman as Depicted in





- Ama Ata Aidoo's Anowa. *International Journal of English and Comparative Literary Studies*, 2(4), 56-68.
- [3] Davis, B. C. (Ed.). (2018). *Encyclopedia of African Diaspora: Origin, Experience, and Culture*. ABC-CLIO.
- [4] Dion, A. (2020). Subverting Traditional Norms: Against Normalization in Ama Ata Aidoo's *The Dilemma of a Ghost* (1965) and *Anowa* (1970). *Scholars Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences*, 68(3), 48-54.
- [5] Dunton, C., & Gibbs, J. (2005). Ama Ata Aidoo. In E. Benson & L. W. Conolly (Eds.), *Encyclopedia of Post-Colonial Literatures in English*. Taylor and Francis Group.
- [6] Gilbert, H. (Ed.). (2013). *Postcolonial Plays: An Anthology*. Routledge.
- [7] Gyimah, M. (2008). AidoAmdgrassa Ata. In C. B. Davis (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of the African Diaspora: Origin, Experience, and Culture*. Bloomsbury Academic.
- [8] Hoeller, H. (1998). Ama Ata Aidoo. In P. N. Parekh & S. F. Jange (Eds.), *Post-Colonial African Writers*. Taylor and Francis Group.
- [9] Needham, A. D. (1995). An Interview with Ama Ata Aidoo. *Massachusetts Review*, 36(1), 123-133.
- [10] Opoku-Agyemang, J. (1997). A Reading of Ama Ata Aidoo's *Anowa*. In P. A. Egejuru & K. H. Katrak (Eds.), *Women Being and African Literature*. Africa World Press, Inc.
- [11] Parekh, P. N., & Jangne, S. F. (Eds.). (1998). *Postcolonial African Writers: A Bio-Biographical Critical Sourcebook*. Taylor and Francis Group.
- [12] Sanka, C. G., et al. (2013). Ama Ata Aidoo and The Akan Culture: A Critique of The *Dilemma of a Ghost* And *Anowa*. *International Journal of Scientific and Technology Research*, 2(9), 89-95.
- [13] Smith, C., & Ce, C. (Eds.). (2015). *Female Subjectivities in African Literature*. African Books Network.
- [14] Snodgrass, M. E. (2006). *Encyclopedia of Feminist Literature*. Fact on File Inc.
- [15] Wilentz, G. (1992). *Binding Cultures: Black Women Writers in Africa and the Diaspora*. Indiana University Press.
- [16] Zulfqar, S. (2016). *African Women Writers and the Politics of Gender*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing.